

February 19, 2023. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray. God of transfiguring light, show us your Word as we read the words of Scripture today, so that your will and way can illumine our paths. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 17, verses 1 through 9. Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸ And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

The word of the lord. **Thanks be to God.**

After college, I spent a year living in the Philippines. I was part of a PCUSA volunteer program working with their partner church, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.

The Philippines is an island nation close to the equator, so it's incredibly hot and incredibly humid year-round. But I was quite lucky. I lived in Baguio, a city in the Luzon mountains that was about 5000 feet above sea level. Because it was so high up in the mountains, the weather was lovely. It was in the 60s-70s year-round, and not very humid. And the mountains were beautiful. It was a wonderful place to live.

I was fortunate enough to explore a lot of the cities and villages in the Luzon mountains. All beautiful in cool climates. But all too often work, or travel would bring me back down the mountain to the heat and humidity.

To get down the mountain, I'd take a bus which took about 6 hours to get from Baguio to Manila.

If I was lucky, I'd know far enough in advance to get a seat on an air-conditioned bus, but usually, I didn't know far enough in advance so I'd have to take the bus without AC.

And it would start out deceptively okay. The windows were always rolled down and the crisp cool mountain air was quite pleasant. But there was always a moment, and it's so seared into my brain I can still remember where on the trip it was - there was a moment as you were going down the mountain and the elevation dropped - that the air changed in an instant.

Suddenly it felt like heat blowing into the bus - hot air dripping with humidity. It was miserable.

You'd get used to it, you had to. But as soon as I got off that bus - no matter the other beautiful places I got to see or people I got to meet – I was always counting down until I could get on the bus again and go back up the mountain to that crisp, cool, air.

In the bible mountains are a character unto themselves. All the important things happen on mountains. In the Old Testament, when Moses would speak to God, he would climb a mountain. God gave him the 10 commandments on a mountain.

On the sermon on the mount Jesus climbs a mountain to speak to the people. He retreats to the mountains to get away from the crowds.

It all happened on the mountain because the mountain was the place where Heaven touched the earth.

And still, we can see why. Their sheer beauty, their height that stretches above the clouds. And the higher the mountain, the harsher the elements, assuring that only a God could reside in such a place.

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up to the top of a mountain, where heaven touches earth, where God resides. And it's there that Jesus is transfigured before them.

The light who shines in the darkness shows his disciples who he truly is - and God speaks to them and claims Jesus as God's own. "This is my son; the beloved, with him I am well pleased.

In that moment, Jesus gives these disciples a remarkable gift. I don't think they would grasp how remarkable until much later. Or even if they did to some extent understand in that moment – they likely would have been confused.

Because as they go back down the mountain Jesus tells them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after his resurrection. Why reveal himself only to keep it hidden?

Some important things happen before Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain. Before, Jesus asks his disciples "Who do you say that I am?" And peter answers "You are the messiah."

After this declaration, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, and the suffering he will endure.

And then it is Peter, the one to declare Jesus the Messiah, who denies it saying that this must never happen.

So, it's then that Jesus takes him up the mountains to reveal who he truly is. As they go back down the mountain, the disciples fail to heal a boy suffering from epilepsy and Jesus says it is because of their lack of faith.

And after this, Jesus for the second time tells the disciples that he will be betrayed, he will die, and he will rise again.

The disciples know that Jesus is the Messiah. They know he is God's son. Yet they won't believe, or don't want to believe, that even the Messiah will suffer and die.

Just as they ascend and descend the mountain, so too will Christ's life, and their own as Christ's disciples, have joys and sorrows, ascents, and descents.

What Jesus gives them on that mountain is just a moment, but it's a moment that gives them enough to sustain the journey. In the places where heaven touches the earth, they get to see the light that will always shine in the darkness. They try to protect him there. To build him a tent to stay on the mountain and stay safe. Safe from suffering and death. But even God cannot be protected.

Up on the mountain is God's world. Here below is the world of the cross. A world that can break us. Yet it's in those transcend moments where we are given the faith to endure. To know we are never beyond redemption. The light will always find us.

Now, we don't always get the chance to climb the physical mountain to see that light – but the beauty of God's kingdom is that it is not contained on the mountain. Moments of transfiguration can happen even within the quite moments of our ordinary lives.

They are moments where perhaps someone you thought you knew does something or shares something and suddenly you see them in a whole new light. You realize that now you see them for who they really are.

Or maybe it's a moment of stillness, where amid the chaos a peace comes over you that you can't explain.

Or maybe it's even a moment of sorrow, where in your pain someone holds you close, and you don't feel alone.

Or maybe it's a moment of laughter that catches you by surprise and you laugh until you feel tears in your eyes.

They are moments that, amid the distress that life can and does bring, give you hope that it's worth living. But the true beauty of moments of transfiguration is not what is revealed to us, but it is how we are transformed by those moments.

Christ revealed himself on that mountain top, and it was the disciples who were transformed.

It was in their transformation – fueled by seeing the living God – that they were able to go down the mountain, knowing that there was nothing they could do to escape the suffering this world would bring.

We, too, are transformed by those moments that stop us in our tracks. Those moments where we see people anew, see them as who God created them to be.

Those moments where we see that there is nowhere God will not find us. Even in our suffering. Even in our joy.

The ability to transform is divine. WE are made in God's image; we are made to transform.

I think will see that as we follow Christ and do our best to help bring God's kingdom here on earth – we aren't changing the world around us – it's us that need to be transformed.

The moment where the air changed on the bus down the mountain has stuck with me. I can still feel the air, as if I was still there, sitting on that bus. It was a tangible reminder that things can change in an instant. The line between the places where heaven touches earth and the world of the cross are passed in an instant. Yet going back and forth between the two transform us in ways we didn't know were possible. Clear our eyes to see what lies in front of us in a whole new way.

God needs just a moment to change everything. But do not be afraid. In those moments we are transformed. Shedding the layers we build around ourselves to keep us safe. Knowing the light that shines in the darkness is never out of reach.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.